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E.O. 12958: DECL: 11/13/2016

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SUBJECT: FORMER DEPUTY PM EXAMINES HIS OPTIONS

Classified By: Ambassador Ralph L. Boyce, reason 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

11. (C) Former Deputy Prime Minister Somkid Jatusripitak told the Ambassador he intends to retire from politics, although top politicians are angling for his support. In a November 9 meeting, Somkid said public support for Thaksin and the Thai Rak Thai (TRT) party remains strong; therefore, he surmised the Constitutional Tribunal will likely order TRT's dissolution. He said the coup leaders are frustrated that they take the blame for governance problems, despite having turned over most authority to the new administration. Somkid said General Winai Phattiyakul is trying to form a political party to ensure he retains political influence. Somkid was generally supportive of the USG's response to the coup but urged the USG to engage in a friendly manner with the RTG at APEC. He expressed positive views about China. End Summary.

THE POLITICAL MAP

12. (C) The Ambassador met November 9 with Somkid Jatusripitak, former Deputy Prime Minister and Deputy Leader of TRT. (Background note: In the final months of the Thaksin administration, TRT officials saw Somkid as the figure most capable of holding TRT together in the event of Thaksin's departure from politics. He also was widely seen as best able to replace Thaksin as Prime Minister. Thaksin appeared concerned by Somkid's popularity and ambition, and publicly adopted an increasingly hostile tone toward Somkid prior to the coup.)

13. (C) Somkid, accompanied by advisor Uttama Savanayana, appeared visibly relaxed and claimed he felt relieved to be out of the political melee and enjoyed having free time to spend golfing. He quipped that he also had to "play hide and seek" with former legislators seeking to ally themselves with him. Former Labor Minister Somsak Thepsutin (leader of the largest faction of former TRT legislators) and Pracharat party Leader Sanoh Thienthong had separately approached him, and both had encouraged public speculation that Somkid would join their respective teams. Somkid told the Ambassador he had listened to their pitches but made no commitments. The time was not yet right, and the rules of the political game remained unclear.

14. (C) Aside from Sanoh and Somsak, Somkid also saw former

Health Minister Pinij Jarusombat as positioned for future influence. Somkid expressed low regard for TRT Acting Leader Chaturon Chaiseng; Chaturon had no option other than staying in TRT, as he had no power base to make him useful to other parties. By contrast, TRT Deputy Leader Sudarat Keyuraphan was more flexible and mobile. The military would feel threatened by Sudarat's remaining with TRT, Somkid said; Sudarat knew this and consequently had adopted a low profile.

VIEW OF THAKSIN

15. (C) Somkid had not spoken directly with Thaksin or Thaksin's wife since the coup, he said, but he had heard indirectly that they did not want him to form a new party. Somkid had sent an indirect message to them that he planned to retire from politics. Somkid expressed pity for Thaksin, surmising that the deposed PM had recently traveled to China because he was heckled by hostile Thai expatriates in London. Somkid guessed that Thaksin was "very lonely."

VIEW OF THE CNS

15. (C) Somkid had dined the night before with Council for National Security (CNS) Chairman Sonthi Boonyaratglin, he related. Somkid characterized the CNS as "too nice," having surrendered "all power" to the interim government. The interim government was not performing well, however, and the CNS was taking the blame. But it was difficult for the CNS to confront the interim government, because interim Prime Minister Surayud Chulanont was the CNS leaders' former senior officer. Nevertheless, the CNS soon would have to "adjust the system," Somkid said, implying a more assertive role for

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the Generals.

16. (C) Somkid spoke highly of Sonthi, characterizing him as a professional soldier, very proper in his ways, and someone who did not seek to promote himself. Sonthi was not interested a political role. CNS Secretary General Winai Phattiyakul, on the other hand, was trying to form a political party, Somkid related with confidence. This new party would possibly involve Pinij Jarusombat, as well as Deputy PM Pridiyathorn Devakula, but Somkid noted Pinij and Pridiyathorn seemed unlikely to get along well together.

THE UNDERCURRENT

17. (C) Both TRT and Thaksin remained highly popular, Somkid said. He characterized the political situation as "explosive," particularly as the public would come to realize the Thaksin administration was more effective than its successor. Thus, the Constitutional Tribunal, which Somkid seemed to consider susceptible to politicization, would find it imperative to dissolve TRT when ruling on a pending election fraud case.

18. (C) Surayud played a special role in stabilizing the situation and containing Thaksin's supporters, Somkid said. Because of his status as a Privy Councilor, Surayud's accepting the position of interim PM signaled royal support for the coup and helped to calm those who would otherwise be more angered by the coup. Somkid also lauded Surayud's lack of political ambition, his even temperament, and his good judgment, and Somkid considered it important that Surayud had the trust of Privy Council President Prem Tinsulanonda.

VIEW OF USG

19. (C) The USG had taken a reasonable and appropriate stance in response to the coup, Somkid said. Thais understood that the USG would oppose the military takeover and stand up for

democracy. That said, Somkid urged a positive interaction between President Bush and Surayud at APEC.

VIEW OF THE PRC

¶10. (C) Somkid noted he was not dismayed by the speed with which the Chinese government, previously close to Thaksin, had welcomed the coup. Thais knew that the Chinese were pragmatic and not focused on democracy. If he were to travel to the PRC today, Somkid said, he would still consider the Chinese as good friends. He also noted parenthetically that he hoped to study Chinese in his spare time.

COMMENT

¶11. (C) Somkid quit TRT soon after the coup, but to many Thais he still represents much that was good about the previous administration (effectiveness, competence, modernity), while his public split with Thaksin also distances him from some of the negatives (corruption, arrogance). Somkid is indeed widely courted and would provide a meaningful boost to whatever party he joins or forms. We doubt he sincerely wishes to retire from politics -- even if he is currently thinking along such lines, his resistance to overtures will surely erode over time.

BOYCE